

**United Church of Christ
Chicago Metropolitan Association
Illinois Conference
Ordination Paper by Robert Knuepfer, Member in Discernment
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Part 1: Present Your Personal Theological Position on:

1. UCC Statement of Faith

The UCC Statement of Faith captures my theology of a triune God of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I believe God is the creator of all things, and that God created us in God's image, and therefore, we have the need and the ability to be creative ourselves. I also believe we are called to follow God in all that we do, to live in God's example of unconditional love for all people, to follow God's commandments, and to praise and honor God in all we do. I believe in Jesus Christ as my personal savior, whose resurrection conquered death and gave believers eternal life. I believe as Christians we are called to discipleship in Christ and in service to others. We are called to proclaim God's Word to all, and to resist the temptation of sin and evil. I believe in the sacraments, including holy baptism and communion, as evidence of our covenant of faith in and with God, by committing to Christ through baptism and by remaining in communion with Christ through the Eucharist. Finally, I believe that God will judge us by God's righteousness, and will, by God's grace only, forgive us as sinners who believe in God, and who will be given strength and courage to do what is right for its own sake, and will be given the peace that comes from eternal life in God's Kingdom. My beliefs reflect the fundamental tenets of the UCC Statement of Faith. However, one can substitute pronouns of "she or her," for "he or his," as we are "no longer male or

female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3-28). For this reason, I prefer the adaptation of the Statement of Faith by Robert V. Moss because its language is more inclusive than the original UCC Statement of Faith.

2. Sacraments of Baptism and Communion

As noted above, I believe the sacraments of baptism and communion are central to UCC theology as reflected in our Statement of Faith, to which I subscribe. As stated in Acts 2:38 and Galatians 3:26-28 (and in the UCC Constitution), we are one with Christ through the act of baptism as an outward sign of our faith commitment. Baptism is a gift of God, and by God’s grace, signifies the beginning of new life as disciples of Christ. Through baptism we commit ourselves to the body of Christ and His universal church as people of God. The use of water as an element of the sacrament of baptism signifies the presence of the Holy Spirit and is a symbol of cleansing and creation, and is the sign and seal of our discipleship in Christ. The sacrament also recalls Jesus’ own baptism (Mark 1:9-11), as well as Jesus’ call to baptize others in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28:16-20; Romans 6:1-4).

By the ritual acts of the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, we celebrate our commitment to be in continuous relationship with God. The ritual, and the elements (bread, wine) used in the sacrament of Holy Communion, serve as visible reminders of the grace, forgiveness, and presence of God in community with God’s believers. We are welcomed to God’s table, to share a simple meal, and to recall Jesus’ loving sacrifice for us, and we listen for God, who is still speaking. In Holy Communion, Christ claims us,

and we claim we belong to Christ. (Luke 22: 7-13; Luke 24: 30-31.) It is a sacred time to reflect on God's grace, and on our desire for justice, love, and peace in the world.

I also subscribe to the theologies and practices set forth in the UCC guides on baptism and communion. (See "Baptism, A Practice of Faith in the United Church of Christ"). In particular, I support the theological statements in the Baptism Guide on the "what, how, why, who, and when," regarding the administration of the sacrament of baptism, and other suggested practices, including the use of sponsors. I subscribe to the Order of Baptism set forth in the UCC Book of Worship and, in particular, the use of the words "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Similarly, I support the Order of Holy Communion in the UCC Book of Worship, and the use of the words recommended for the administration of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

3. The Bible – Its Authority, Relevance and Application Today

From a theological perspective, I believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, expressed through the prophets and apostles, and other human authors. As such, I believe the commandments and doctrines set forth in the Bible are authoritative over human belief and behavior. In my view, any inaccuracies in certain accounts of history or science are attributable to human fallibility.

I believe the Bible continues to be as relevant and applicable today as it was when first presented as an oral account, and later as a written account, of God's Word. The basis for my belief is that God was revealed to the prophets and disciples, verbally and in written form through the Commandments, as well as in writings by human authors, and, of course, through the ministry and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Skeptics compare reliance on the Bible to using a centuries old science text to teach science today. Science and technology have changed dramatically over time, as we create new and improved processes and products, but human nature has not changed since the Bible was completed more than 2,000 years ago. Although culture or context may change, the principles of our faith are eternal and immutable. The Bible has stood the test of time, and can prepare us for any challenges in life. (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). The Bible has always been relevant because it is a timeless source of comfort, guidance, and meaning in life.

4. The Church – Its Mission and Ministry

One of Jesus' final admonitions to his disciple Peter was "to feed my sheep," and so too we are called as Christians by Jesus' Great Commission to proclaim the Gospel to all, and to serve our communities as disciples of Christ.

This mission is reflected in many avenues of Christian service, whether in parish, hospital, prison, or other community ministries, and by Christian education, whether in preaching, teaching, writing, music, or other forms of communication of God's Word.

The UCC possesses an extraordinary legacy in support of its commitment to social justice issues throughout the world, and this heritage calls to us to continue that commitment, and in so doing, to honor the Great Commandment – to love God and to love one another. The Christian church is the embodiment of Jesus Christ and a sacred space to nourish our relationship with Him. It is not necessarily a physical place as it is a matter of time and space in which we can worship God from whom creation and all things are derived. As a parish minister, my goal is to use Christ's teachings to share the Gospel with others to strengthen their faith and to bring non-believers to faith

through the Word. The church has been, and has the opportunity to continue to be, the single greatest force for peace, freedom, and justice in the world. I envision using the church to address social justice issues for which Jesus gave His life for all of us, and in His name to improve relations among all people.

The greatest issue facing the church is the threat to being in relationship with Christ. The Christian church is threatened by declining membership, secular or political diversions, competition from other religions, lack of religious freedom, corrupt leadership, and many other challenges. It is estimated that a significant percentage of mainline Protestant churches will simply close their doors in the next 20 years due to lack of membership to sustain them. The second major issue facing the church is the decline in the number of pastors to serve the church and lead it to once again become the primary source of faith growth and development for all God's children. Enrollment in seminary M.Div programs has declined by more than 10% in recent years, compared to enrollments in other master's degree programs which have increased by 10% over the same period.

Finally, we need to continually work on interfaith initiatives in the areas of equality, freedom, and justice, and the church can be an effective vehicle for leadership in this area.

5. UCC Identity – Why Be Ordained in UCC?

I have been a member of the United Church of Christ for more than 30 years, all of that with the Union Church of Hinsdale, Illinois. During this time, I have been introduced to the history and polity of the UCC as a member of the congregation and

through volunteer service on its many boards, and as an attendee at various events hosted by the Chicago Metropolitan Association and the Illinois Conference. Several years ago, I took the UCC History, Polity, and Theology course at Chicago Theological Seminary taught by Rev. John Thomas, former General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ. It has been said that the best way to learn is to teach the subject, and so our final exam required us to design a course for our congregation on UCC history, polity, and theology. These classroom and life experiences confirmed for me that the UCC and its ministry and mission are consistent with my own theology, and that the history and polity of the UCC reflect and resonate with my own beliefs.

As a covenantal denomination, the UCC places Christ at its center, and calls its members to be in covenant with God and all of God's people. A UCC minister also covenants with parishioners to be disciples of Christ in all that we do. These principles reinforce my subscription to the UCC Constitution and guide my daily activities as a member of the United Church of Christ.

The UCC's historical roots as a congregation-led church are also consistent with my own beliefs and experiences with volunteer-led organizations over the past forty years. I am very comfortable working collaboratively with others and in sharing leadership responsibilities between clergy and lay leadership.

The UCC commitment to social justice is also compelling for me. Most of my adult life has been committed to volunteer service on behalf of the oppressed and underserved in our society. It is a blessing to be a continuing participant in missionary service to others on a local, regional, and global basis.

While I appreciate the rich history and traditions of the UCC, formed from the roots of four Protestant denominations in 1957, the future implications of this heritage are most appealing to me. A church that is called to be “united and uniting,” reflects the passage in John 17:21, “that they all may be one”, and is especially relevant in an era of divisiveness and disharmony. A church that is called to be a prophetic witness to speak the “truth to power, liberate the oppressed, care for the poor, and comfort the afflicted,” speaks volumes about the legacy and responsibility of the United Church of Christ and its mission for the past, the present, and the future of our faith. (See UCC “What We Believe” Statement). These and similar themes reflected in our “What We Believe” Statement certainly match my own theology of a vital church, grounded in Christ, seeking to change lives, with an understanding that unity does not mean uniformity, but a flexibility to see the constancy of Christ and His teachings in new and meaningful ways. The notion that we ought not to place a period where God has placed a comma, is a wonderful reminder that “God is Still Speaking!”

6. The Writers, Theologians, and/or Preachers and How they have Influenced You.

Other than Jesus, the most compelling preacher of the Christian faith for me is the Apostle Paul. His work speaks for itself, and he did more through his preaching, in person and by written word, to share the Gospel and spread the Christian faith than any other disciple. From a historical perspective, other significant preachers for me include Charles Spurgeon (300 million copies of his sermons in print), John Knox, the fiery Scot who transformed a nation, and Jonathan Edwards, whose sermon “Sinners in the

Hands of an Angry God,” continues to be read today, and whose contributions strengthened the Protestant movement in America.

Compelling theologians for me include Martin Luther, for his ground-breaking work which began the Reformation, and from the 20th century, Reinhold Niebuhr, whose works, including “Moral Man and Immoral Society,” forged new paths in modern Christian thought about theology in the public square. Other favorite theologians from the last century include Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for his work, “The Cost of Discipleship,” and for his courage in confronting the Nazi regime, and Paul Tillich, whose works in systematic theology opened new doors for me in faith.

Compelling preachers for me include Harry Emerson Fosdick, for his gifted messages and for what I learned from the study of his intensive preparation of his sermons. In more recent times, three preachers stand out for me – Martin Luther King, whose sermons and speeches in support of civil rights changed America for the good, and his cohort, Andrew Young, whose sermons mesmerize me for their passion, style, tone, and enduring message. Both used the pulpit and their extraordinary speaking abilities to change the world for the better. Finally, I include Dan Meyer, senior pastor of Christ Church in Oak Brook, Illinois, under whom I studied preaching, among other aspects of parish ministry, and who gave me my first opportunities to preach to his congregation while a pastoral intern. He is one of the most gifted preachers I have had the privilege to witness, from the scope and scale of his preparation to the exemplary delivery of his sermons.

Other compelling writers, in addition to the above, would include those whose work relates the practice of our faith to everyday living. I am especially interested in the

“faith at work movement,” which focuses on how to practice one’s faith in the workplace. In fact, I have worked as a corporate chaplain for a private company, and presented my M.Div. thesis at Union Church on the topic of “Faith at Work.” Examples of critical thinkers on this subject include H. Richard Niebuhr’s “Christ and Culture,” Tim Keller’s “Every Good Endeavor,” and Robert Banks’ compendium on “Everyday Christianity.” C.S. Lewis is also a favorite author who, while not a theologian, wrote the classic apologetic work “Mere Christianity,” among other faith-based works.

7. Briefly Describe Your Present Ministry and/or Call.

While there are many opportunities for service in God’s Kingdom, I feel called by God to parish ministry. I was blessed to have many work-study experiences in seminary, including service as a hospital and prison chaplain, and in churches with a variety of offerings, from an independent “mega-church” with nationally-televised services, to a large suburban UCC congregation. These experiences provided fulfilling examples of pastoral care ministries. For me, the discernment process has not been a straight-line journey, nor a labyrinth journey of circles and dead-ends, but a persistent, evolving, and compelling call to ministry in a congregational setting. Administering the sacraments, preaching, teaching, and pastoral care would be the central focus of my ministry. My other work-life experiences allowed me to develop skills in leadership development, organizational and human behavior, finance, fund-raising, and other tasks important to church administration, all of which could also be useful in parish ministry.

I am presently serving as a pastoral associate at Union Church in Hinsdale, Illinois, and pray that I may continue to serve Union Church and its congregation as a member of its ministry team if I receive an invitation to ordination from the UCC.

8. What is Your Understanding of Pastoral Ethics and Boundaries?

I subscribe to the Ethics of Ministry codes set forth in the Manual of Ministry. I am familiar with the scriptural basis for the command to lead an exemplary life so that our words and actions as a minister are a witness to the Christian faith and a model of Christian life. (1 Peter 5:1-11). I also understand the commitment to continuous learning and ongoing development of ministry skills to promote the growth of the church as ministers are called to do. (1 Timothy 4:14-15). I am presently a candidate for the Doctor of Ministry degree at Chicago Theological Seminary, where I am working on my preaching skills. Finally, I understand that as a minister, I am called to model unconditional love of God, neighbor, and self, in all that I think, say, and do. However, I confess that I am a sinner, and fall short of the expectation, despite my best and constant efforts, to lead by example a model Christian life. Despite this weakness, I am committed to observing and complying with all UCC codes of conduct and policies regarding ethical behavior as a minister.

In addition to becoming familiar with the ethical provisions set forth in the UCC Manual on Ministry, I have completed many courses in pastoral ethical boundary training, including classes at the University of Chicago Divinity School, Jackson Park Hospital, Cook County Jail, Northwestern Memorial Hospital (3 ethics seminars as part of CPE I), and the "Clergy Ethics" course offered by Chicago Theological Seminary.

9. Reflection on the Ordination Vows in UCC Book of Worship and the Promises of These Vows.

I have reviewed the UCC service of ordination and the commitments to be made as a candidate for ordination. During my period of discernment, I have also attended several UCC ordination services held in the Chicago Metropolitan Association of the Illinois Conference, and so understand and subscribe to the promises to be made. If presented for ordination, then I would be committed to performing my ministry in accordance with the vows set forth in the UCC Book of Worship.

Part 2: Discuss milestones in your life and how they relate to your Christian experience and your request for ordination. (Do not include personal details of others without their permission). How has that experience(s) informed your faith story and the discernment of call (without identifying that person)?

I am a Christian, having been raised in a Christian home, and having accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior when I was 16 years old as a member of the Presbyterian Church of Elmhurst, Illinois.

My faith journey began with my infant baptism and confirmation as a teenager in the Presbyterian church. I have been active in my church as a youth and as an adult, and have practiced my faith in many roles as a son, brother, husband, father, grandfather, and friend to other Christians, as well as to non-believers.

I was married in the Epiphany Lutheran Church in Elmhurst, Illinois (my wife's church - we were childhood sweethearts and now married 41 years), and we joined the First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn, Illinois, where two of our four children were

baptized. The remaining two were baptized at Union Church of Hinsdale, Illinois, a congregation of the United Church of Christ, where all our children were later confirmed. (Union Church was the merger of the Presbyterian and Congregational churches in 1918.)

Our family has been active in Union Church for decades, and I have served in a variety of volunteer roles there. For example, I served as chairs of the Board of Trustees, the Board of Parish Life, the Mission Board, and the "Building Our Future" capital campaign which funded an \$11 million renovation of the church, and I also served on several pastoral search committees.

The call to ministry had been on my heart for many years, and I finally mustered the courage to do something about it. The discernment process for admission to seminary involved interviews and conversations with many pastors, family, and friends, and visits to many divinity schools. This process confirmed my understanding that God had called me to do seek admission to seminary. I did not experience an epiphany, or significant moment, but the call process evolved, and was revealed to me over time.

My most significant faith experience was attending the University of Chicago Divinity School for an M. Div degree. The quality of the faculty, curriculum, and students was exceptional. Although academically quite competitive, the experience exceeded my expectations in all respects. A special aspect of the program was the work-study practicums, which allowed me to serve as a chaplain at Jackson Park Hospital, Cook County Jail, and Northwestern Memorial Hospital, as well as serve as a pastoral intern at Christ Church of Oak Brook, Illinois and Union Church of Hinsdale, Illinois. In particular, my work as a hospital and prison chaplain reinforced my interest in

pastoral counseling. My work as a pastoral intern at Christ Church, which has 18 full-time pastors, gave me extraordinary insights into the administration of a “mega” church. These experiences only strengthened my faith, and most importantly, confirmed for me the call to parish ministry.

The second most significant faith experience was a 2011 trip to Israel and Jordan with my wife, and 38 close friends, to visit the major sites of the Holy Land. It was a life-changing experience to be able to “walk where Jesus walked,” and it culminated in our infant baptisms being renewed in the Jordan River.

The third most important faith experience was a Bible study hosted by Bible Study Fellowship International, which I attended for the 8 years prior to entering divinity school. The educational experience was extraordinary, and I believed in the value of the curriculum and teaching so much that I recruited approximately 50 friends to join the group, which now consists of 400 men who meet weekly on Monday evenings.

Finally, the most significant personal experiences have been my marriage, witnessing the births and marriages of our four children, and the joy of being a grandparent to nine as of this writing. My most satisfying professional experience was the founding of our law firm’s central Europe and CIS (former Soviet Union) legal practice. There we encountered Christians who had been forced to worship in secret for a generation of Communist rule. The most fulfilling service experiences have been annual mission trips, such as administering polio vaccines to children in the Muslim slums of India, and working with orphans in Honduras. My most fulfilling intellectual activity has been teaching at Northwestern University in the Graduate Business School and in the Law School for the past fifteen years.

I would add that my life has not been without tragedy, challenge, and disappointment. The death of loved ones has been especially painful. I lost my mother and one brother way too young. All the “older generation” of my family is gone. As a chaplain at Northwestern, I dealt with nearly one death every day for three months, and learned the importance of self-care. With each loss, however, I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit at that time and in that place, so with great sorrow came a comforting peace that is indescribable.

Finally, as my generation approaches the twilight years of this life, the need for faith and a relationship with God has never been greater. An increasingly secular culture has created great challenges to the practice of our faith, and I hope to play a yet undefined role in helping my brothers and sisters strengthen their faith, and to help non-believers to find their way to God.

Part 3: Describe Your Personal or “inner” Call to Ministry.

In describing my personal call to ministry, I did not have a single “moment” that defined my call, but instead experienced a series of moments that constitute a call for me. My earliest experiences in my family and church were based on learning the joy of serving others. Our parents taught us how to serve our family (meal preparation and clean-up, household chores), and expanded this teaching to service to others outside the family (church ministries, YMCA, Boy Scouts), and later, to service in school-based activities (AFS, charitable organizations). As a lawyer, I was engaged in a service profession, helping others solve their legal and business problems, and in this, I found great satisfaction. It could be said that I have enjoyed the blessings of a “wonderful

life,” filled with happiness as defined by good health, a great spouse and life-partner, four children and nine grandchildren who live nearby, and financial prosperity. But as I “climbed the mountain” of my profession and personal life, I felt a longing for something else, and every time I prayed about it, I kept hearing God’s voice calling me to service in His church in deeper and more meaningful ways. As noted above, I invested in an eight-year structured Bible study that, at the end, only increased my hunger for a deeper understanding of the scriptures, and for opportunities to share these learnings with others. During a final conversation with a close friend and then senior pastor of my childhood church, he counseled me to attend seminary at the University of Chicago Divinity School. And so, at the “top of my game,” as the senior partner of the world’s largest law firm, I surprised (shocked) many colleagues and clients, and many family members and friends, when I resigned from the firm, and entered the M. Div. program at the University of Chicago. As noted earlier, this was the culmination of my call by God to ministry, and I have now begun now to practice that call in parish ministry at Union Church. In this role, I am engaged in giving sermons, Christian education, visiting members in their homes, places of work, and in hospitals and nursing homes. I am also supporting our membership development efforts and our mission work. In particular, we have embarked on an \$5 million endowment campaign, and have selected early childhood education as our signature mission project for the next 15 years.

Most importantly, I believe I have been called to share the Gospel with others as an ordained minister. In my view, there is no greater privilege, and no greater responsibility.

Conclusion

I am grateful for your consideration of this statement, and humbled by the opportunity ahead.

In His Name,

Robert Knuepfer

